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**THE KING
AND THE BONDMEN.**



LONDON:
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THE
KING AND THE BONDMEN.



Going Home.

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THE KING AND THE BONDMEN.

CHAPTER I.

A FEW WORDS OF HISTORY TO INTRODUCE A STORY.

‘ Now, children, shall we have that story about an event which took place in England some hundreds of years ago ?’

‘ Oh, yes, grandpapa : do tell it. We are all ready.’

‘ Well, then—you will, perhaps, not have forgotten what I told you some months ago about the sea-kings—how their history ended with the coming of William the Conqueror, who brought over a large army and took possession of England. From that time up to the period of the story which I shall presently begin, there had been a great deal of fighting, and suffering, and misery, all over the country. Everywhere the native Anglo-Saxon population had been forced to submit to the Normans who treated them with great severity and cruelty. In some parts the land had been laid waste for scores of miles, and no living thing left therein, to punish the inhabitants for daring to resist the invaders. When William became king, he had more than eight hundred parks, and forests, and chases, throughout the realm ; and such delight did he take in the deer, which were then numerous in the great woods that

grew thickly in almost every shire, that it was said of him he loved them as though he were their father. Very strict laws were made to punish any one who should attempt to kill or to injure a deer, and rangers and keepers, who were called verderers and regards, were appointed to keep watch in the forests and seize the offenders. Besides this, nearly all the land was taken away from those to whom it belonged and given to the barons, and lords, and captains, as a reward for helping William to conquer the country, and when these chiefs took possession they became masters also of nearly all the people who were living on the estates. At that time large numbers of the population were in the condition of slaves, and when a farm was bought or sold they were made over from one owner to another just as though they were a flock of sheep, as though they were fit for nothing but to work without pay, and could neither feel hardship nor injustice. They were forced to do all the hard work, to fight in the battles whether they would or not, and to fare badly. Anything was good enough for *villans*, as they were called; and if ever they dared to complain, they were flogged, or shut up in prison, or made to stand for several hours in a sort of pillory. So it went on for many years, the lords and barons becoming more and more powerful, and the villans or rural population more and more discontented. Had there not been some good and charitable men among the monks and friars who then lived in the monasteries and abbeys, whose ruins now look so beautiful in many of the pleasantest parts of our land, the poor thralls would have been miserable indeed. The monks, however, were at times enabled to offer them consolation, and to protect them from the cruel punishments of their masters. After a while the barons began to quarrel among themselves, and to guard against the danger of sudden attacks, they built strong castles on their

estates, in which they could shut themselves up in time of danger and withstand the assaults of their enemies. While they quarrelled the villans and other peasantry suffered, and to be as safe as possible from the attacking parties, the poor people used to build their houses near to the castle, and that is one reason why in our days we frequently see a village or small town at the foot of a hill on the top of which stands the ruin of an ancient baronial fortress. Sometimes, too, the barons would quarrel with the king, and the monarch had frequently to yield to their demands, and grant them many privileges. During the reign of Stephen they built castles by hundreds, more than ever before, and great was the distress which their strifes and contentions brought upon the country. One of our old chroniclers says :—" In this king's time, all was dissension, and evil, and rapine. Thou mightest go a whole day's journey, and not find a man sitting in a town, nor an acre of land tilled. The poor died of hunger ; and those who had been men well to do begged for bread. Never was more mischief done by heathen invaders. To till the ground was to plough the sands of the sea. This lasted nineteen years that Stephen was king, and it grew continually worse and worse."

Then as time went on, wars broke out between England and France, and money was wanted to pay the cost, for war is an expensive game, and the way of raising money was to make the people pay taxes. This created murmurs and discontent ; and gradually the people in the towns by trade and industry grew so powerful that the barons no longer dared to molest them, and at last they obtained the right to sit in parliament and assist in making the laws which they were called on to obey. At times some of the barons took part with the people, as in the days of king John, when they forced that monarch to sign what is called Magna Charta, or the Great Charter,

which laid the foundation for many of the liberties and privileges which we now enjoy. But it is not easy to change old customs, and though part of the nation had gained their freedom, the villans were yet in as irksome a state of bondage as ever, and they, seeing many of their neighbours bettered in condition, thought that they would like to be free too; for it was very bitter for a man to feel that he did not belong to himself, and that he could only do as he was bid by his taskmasters. But the poor villans were very ignorant, they had but few friends, and whenever they dared to murmur or rebel they only brought down upon themselves the vengeance of the great lords, who, besides punishing them, used to say that slaves had nothing to do but to labour, and were not to trouble themselves with any other matters. However, when once a people feel that they ought to be free, and know that they are treated with injustice, they nurse the thought silently in their hearts until the time comes to bring it forth, and so it went on in England up to the days of king Richard the Second.

CHAPTER II.

GOING HOME FROM WORK—THE SURPRISE—THE RESCUE—THE MEETING OF THE VILLANS—COMMENCEMENT OF THE STRUGGLE FOR LIBERTY.

AND now the story begins:—

The sun was slowly setting on a calm evening in June, and threw its golden beams afar over the landscape, and on the trees of a tall forest that

stretched away, from the base of a hill on which stood a strong castle, to a long distance across the slopes and levels of the county of Essex. The slanting beams penetrated here and there through the closely interwoven branches, and sent a stream of light down into the dusky shade below, making the surrounding gloom look the deeper by the contrast. The trees grew thick and tangled together, not trimmed and thinned as the forests are in our days ; and the path which wound in and out among the stems was rough and uneven, sometimes making a sudden bend to get out of the way of an old mossy root, or losing itself in a swampy hollow, or crossing a little stream that crept lazily along in its narrow channel. The owls were beginning to hoot, and now and then the hoarse croak of a raven was heard ; indeed, all things showed that night, the time for repose, was coming on.

Along this path a young man was walking with a weary step, as though he were very tired. His dress was a gaberdine or frock similar to that worn by labourers of the present day, except that it was made of coarse gray woollen, and fastened round the waist with a belt ; short leggings covered his knees, while his feet, neck and head were bare. On his shoulder he carried a spade, which was not shaped as ours are, but had a place on one side only for the foot. Once or twice he shifted it from side to side, or grasping it with both hands seemed as though he would like to strike a blow with it as a weapon, and muttered to himself as he went along. Evidently something had happened to trouble him, for his look was full of anger and vexation. At last he spoke in a low tone—‘ And so the new lord is to come next month, and we shall all have to go and do service to him, and promise to be his bondmen as long as we live. Oh, ’tis a weary, weary life ! Will it always be so ? ’

Then he trudged on for awhile in silence. Presently he spoke again : ' And the steward ; he must give me stripes forsooth, and call me a dog, and threaten to put me in the tumbril because the field was not dug to please him. Ah, if I were but a free man I would have knocked him down with my spade ! Oh, if I could but run away, and work where I pleased ! 'Tis misery to be a bondman.'

Just then a slight noise attracted the speaker's attention ; he looked up and saw a deer walking slowly among the bushes a little way from the path, and munching the tender twigs. He stopped at the sight and looked hastily round ; no one was visible : ' There again,' he said, ' there's something for the lords and nobles : a poor man hardly dares look at it, but hap what may I'll scare the beast.' So saying, he hurled his spade with so sure an aim that it struck the deer on the shoulder ; the animal uttered a short quick cry of pain, and dashed off at full speed into the heart of the forest.

The man had picked up his spade, and stood watching the flying animal when he was startled by a loud voice in his ear, and a heavy hand on his shoulder.

' How now !' cried one of the keepers, who had witnessed the occurrence from a place of concealment ' is that the way our lord's deer are to be worried by a sulky kern ? You thought no one was by to see ; but come, a night in the castle dungeon will teach you to mend your manners.'

The bondman struggled to escape, but the keeper's grasp was too secure to be easily shaken off ; he was forced to submit, and was led away in the opposite direction to that in which he had just before been walking.

Ralph, that was the peasant's name, walked sullenly on by the side of his captor, determined to seize the first opportunity that offered for escape, but with very little hope. It was a sudden change from

walking homewards to comfortable rest to being made a prisoner, and his heart was full of bitter thoughts against those who punished a poor man for chasing an animal in the forest.

The evening grew darker as the two went farther among the trees ; they had got near the entrance of a gloomy opening which led between the tangled thickets to the castle, when twenty or thirty men were seen to come from it with swift but silent steps.

‘ What knaves be these ? ’ cried the keeper, thinking to intimidate the party of peasants : for such they were.

‘ What knave is it that asks ? ’ retorted the men, who instead of showing any alarm came resolutely forwards, and looked threateningly at the speaker. Presently one among them cried as he saw the prisoner still held fast in the keeper’s gripe ; ‘ ’Tis Ralph Spink, son of good man Hubert, who has worked hereabouts ever since he was born. Loose your hand fellow, you hold a better man than yourself ; ’ he added, addressing the keeper.

A dozen hands were raised to enforce the command : Ralph regained his liberty, and the keeper in turn became a prisoner. Six men were bid to lead him away to the wildest part of the forest, and leave him there bound fast to a tree. Meanwhile the others bent their steps to another part of the wood to a secluded hollow, where, in the dim light of the moon which was beginning to rise, two or three hundred men were seen standing round a big stone, from the top of which an individual was speaking vehemently to them.

‘ I tell ye,’ he said, ‘ that the work is begun. Our brethren in Norfolk have risen against the tax, and cut off the heads of the jury that sat to try them. Was it not enough that last year every soul in England of the age of sixteen and over paid a tax of a

groat,* that our gentlemen and nobles might have money to pay for their wars? but now they must have more money, and every man and woman, and their children of fifteen years, shall pay three groats, whether he have the coin or not; and the tax-gatherers go about like wolves to worry the poor. Will ye submit to this?’

Here there were cries of ‘Nay, nay, nay,’ from the crowd, and many said ‘What shall we do? what shall we do?’

‘I will tell ye what ye shall do,’ answered the orator: ‘ye shall do the same as our brethren in Kent. The tax-gatherers went to Dartford, and entering a house they demanded the tax with so much of brutal violence and insult that Wat Tyler, the sturdy smith, felled one of them dead to the ground with a blow of his hammer. Thereupon the people ran together from all parts shouting against the grievous tax, and having chosen Tyler as their leader, they are now marching towards London to seek justice at the hands of king Richard, who would be a friend to the commons but for the advice of evil counsellors. The bondmen’s day has come at last; thousands are up in arms, and will ye not join them.’

‘We will, we will!’ replied a hundred voices.

‘Let us go, then,’ said the speaker as he descended from his elevated post; ‘I will be your leader. Now, for king Richard and the true Commons!’

‘For king Richard and the true Commons!’ cried the throng; those who knew the way through the forest then went to the front to serve as guides, and in a few minutes the whole troop had disappeared, led on by the hope of liberty. Ralph went with

* The groat, or fourpence of king Richard’s days, was about equal to one shilling of our present money.

them, glad to escape from his daily toil under a hard task-master.

This was an eventful night for the young peasant ; we must now see what took place in the home to which he was going when he was made prisoner by the keeper.

CHAPTER III.

THE BONDMAN'S HOME—HIS FAMILY, AND WHAT THEY TALKED ABOUT.

Just at the outskirts of the forest, there stood a small rustic cabin or cottage, built of wood plastered with clay, and with a low thatched roof, not much unlike the humblest sort of labourer's cottages to be seen in the southern counties of England in the present day. But it was very rude and roughly finished ; there was no glass then to fill the opening that served for a window, and the wind entered by many a chink, making itself keenly felt during the cold blasts of winter. Now, however, being a calm spring evening, the door of the little tenement stood open, and showed the inmates seated in quiet conversation. A few heavy, rudely-formed stools, and a three-legged table, made up nearly the whole furniture of the humble dwelling. On one of the stools sat a man whose hair was beginning to turn gray, and whose back was bent by years of labour, but a thick full beard which covered his chin gave a dignified look to his countenance. By his side was seated a woman, who, while she talked, employed herself in spinning

woollen yarns from a distaff; and a comely-looking maiden sat near the bright wood fire baking cakes on the hearth. The day's work was over, and the villan and his family were about to eat their evening meal.

Besides these three, there was a young man in the dress of a monk, who stood leaning against the wall near the door, and from his likeness to the girl at the fire, it was easy to see that he was her brother. It was not uncommon in those days for the son of a villan to be taken into a monastery or convent to be brought up under the charge of one of the monks, until at length he became a monk himself. From time to time, he looked out along the narrow path that led from the cottage to the forest, as though watching for some one; at last he said, 'Ralph is late this evening. If he tarries much longer, I shall have to go without seeing him. I wonder what keeps him?'

'Some new wrong, I trow,' said Hubert, as the elderly man was named, 'for Ralph is a good lad, and comes willingly home when his day's work is ended. Mayhap the steward hath doubled his task, for the new lord is to come to the castle ere long. And so it goes on; we must toil for our masters by night and by day, whether we like it or not. I am a-weary of such a life.'

'Say not so, father,' answered the girl, who had left her occupation at the fire, 'say not so; for if we work hard, do we not have holidays sometimes? and we can rest on the Sundays.'

'Truly we have these, Cicely; but am I not a bondman; are we not all born thralls of the baron? I want freedom, not holidays.'

'It will not always be so, father; the day will come when they who till the land shall be as free as the town-folk and the gentlefolk,' said the young monk Jocelin.

‘Ay, my son, but when ; I said so too, when I was young as you are ; for we heard how that the peasants and bondmen in France had risen up to fight for their freedom. Brave work it was, for they killed many of the nobles, and pulled down their castles ! But now my hair is turning gray, and freedom is as far off as ever.’

‘Father Eustace was once in France,’ replied Jocelin, ‘and I have heard him say that the sufferings of the peasants became afterwards worse than ever, and they knew not what to do in their misery. I have myself read of such things in a book in our convent library.’

‘I wish I could read,’ interrupted Cicely, ‘there must be wonderful matters in those old parchment volumes, since Jocelin takes such delight in them.’

‘Ay,’ said Joan, as she looked with pride on her son, ‘there be wonders, truly ! Do we not see that the man who can read is oftentimes of more use than a noble ? But why shouldst thou wish to read, Cicely ? there be no books for the like of thee.’

‘At times,’ observed Jocelin, ‘when I have been sitting with Father Eustace, copying some rare book for many hours, till our fingers are weary, then he will say he doubteth not that some day men will find out a quicker way of making books than copying them with the pen on skins of parchment. Father Eustace hath a goodly discernment, but I see not how it is to be done. He saith also that a day will come when knowledge shall be mightier than they who bring many men to battle.’

‘Oh, if that were going to happen in our day !’ exclaimed Cicely.

Joan now laid aside her distaff, and taking one of the hard, horny hands of the bondman in her own, she said, ‘Listen to what Jocelin says, husband ; doth he not often bring us words of peace and comfort, which he learns yonder in the convent ?’

‘Who talks of peace and comfort,’ rejoined Hubert; ‘am I not a thrall? Must I not go to the field at day dawn, and yoke the oxen, and plough till my back aches; and then when evening comes, I must drive the oxen home, and feed them, and cleanse their stall. And after all, if our masters be not pleased, we get blows and foul words. They call us dogs and liars: they say we have no gratitude, and are only fit to live with swine; and they tell us to eat nettles and reeds, and briars and straw for our Sunday diet, and peascods all the week besides; and they ask why should a villan eat beef or any dainty meat, and bid him go down on all-fours, and eat grass as an ox. I am a-weary, I am a-weary; would that I were free!’

‘Did not Roger, our eldest son, want to be free?’ replied Joan in a sad tone. ‘He fled from his home, and we have never seen him since.’

‘’Twas well done,’ answered Hubert; ‘I would fly too were I younger. They raised the hue and cry after him, but he kept out of their way for a year and a day, and then he was free. Did we not hear that he had hidden himself in London, and learnt the craft of a smith, and can work wherever he likes. It is better never to see him, than to have him here a thrall.’

‘I wish he would come and see us,’ said Cicely.

‘So do I,’ observed the mother; ‘it would make my heart glad to see our first-born once more, now that he is free.’

‘I wish he would come,’ repeated Hubert, ‘and take Cicely away with him.’

‘Take Cicely away!’ exclaimed Joan, ‘and why?’

‘Because then she would be safe from the evil-minded steward; he told me to-day he would take her to be one of the waiting-maids at the castle.’

Cicely uttered a loud cry of alarm, and clung round her father’s neck, as though to seek his protection, while Jocelin, starting forwards, cried,

‘Would the bad man dare to do this? What, our comely Cicely to live among those roysterers at the castle! I will speak to Father Eustace about it, and he, if needs be, will ask the abbot to interpose the authority of the church for the protection of the weak against the strong.’ He would have spoken further, but at that moment the sound of a bell was heard pealing softly at a distance. ‘I must go,’ he said, ‘and without having seen Ralph. Good-night, father—mother—sister. Be of good cheer. I will see you again ere long. Good-night.’

So saying, he went out, and was soon out of sight in the deepening gloom of the forest.

CHAPTER IV.

AN ARRIVAL AT SUPPER TIME—AND THE NEWS THAT FOLLOWED IT.

JOCELIN’S departure roused the family from their trouble: Hubert rose and closed the door, and fastened it with a stout wooden bar; and while a few sticks were thrown on the fire to raise a flame, he dropped a thick curtain over the window to prevent the light from being seen by any one on the outside. Meantime, Cicely placed a piece of bacon on the table in a wooden trencher, and brought the cakes from the hearth, and the three inmates of the humble dwelling sat down to their frugal supper.

They were eating in silence, when a hasty knock came at the door. ‘Oh, there’s Ralph,’ cried Cicely, ‘I’m so glad!’ and she sprang up to unbar the door.

‘Let me go, child,’ said her father, ‘we know not who it may be.’ He rose, and going to the door, asked who it was that knocked at that late hour.

‘A dusty-foot,’ was the answer.

Hubert stood hesitating, when his wife said, ‘That’s the voice of the pedler, who brought us news of our son from London. Let him come in.’ He immediately unbarred the door, and admitted a tall strong man, with a sunburnt face, a short staff in his hand, a heavy pack on his shoulder, and dusty feet, as though he had walked far.

The stranger entered with a weary step, and flinging his pack down in a corner, drew a stool to the hearth, threw a handful of sticks on the fire, and seemed inclined to make himself at home. Hubert invited him to share in the supper, on which the pedler rose, and looking at the table, said, ‘Tis homely fare ; however, so there be enough, it will do as well as the best for a hungry traveller. But have ye no wine, friend Hubert ?’

‘Who asks for wine in a bondman’s cottage ?’ was the answer. ‘Wine is for the nobles, but hard blows for the thrall.’

‘Had ye been in London on the first entry of king Richard,’ said the packman, ‘ye would have seen wine in plenty for all comers.’

‘Did you see it, master dusty-foot ?’ asked Cicely ; ‘tell us all about it.’

‘I did see it : the king had come on horseback from Richmond, attended by a procession of lords and gentlemen, who wore such rich and costly apparel that the like had never before been seen. Silks and velvets from France and Italy seemed to be of no more account to them than serge to a peasant ; and there were some of the cloaks trimmed with fur and precious stones worth ten thousand marks a-piece. Every noble was attended by a knight walking at each side of his horse, and many of the gentlemen

wore their hose of two colours—one leg red and the other white, or purple and yellow, and the peaks of their shoes curled up half way to their knees. It was a brave spectacle, and they went on with trumpets and clarions sounding ; and the people who crowded the streets by thousands, and gazed from every window, shouted with right goodwill as they went by. It took three hours for the train to pass, and all that time the public fountains and conduits were made to run with wine, so that whoever would could drink as much as he chose. Then in Chepe there was a castle built with four towers, and on each tower there stood a beautiful maiden waving leaves of gold over the king's head, and scattering handfuls of gold coins. At this there was a great blast from all the trumpets ; and the maidens descended, and filling their cups with wine that flowed from the fountain at the foot of the castle, they offered them to Richard, who stopped to drink. While he halted, a golden angel that stood over the gate of the castle, stooped and placed a crown upon his head. Then the shouts were louder than ever : it seemed as though the whole city was going mad, each street striving to outdo the other.'

'Oh, I wish I had been there !' cried Cicely, 'to see so rare a sight.'

'What wouldst thou do, a poor bondman's daughter, in the great city ?' retorted Joan, 'better for thee to be here in the forest. But,' she added, turning to the packman, 'have ye seen Roger ; can ye tell us nought of him ?'

'Yes, I can tell ye somewhat about Roger. Three weeks ago, I saw him in London, and well and hearty he looks, and as ready with his hammer as any man in the city.'

'But why comes he not to see us ?' asked Joan.

'He wishes first to skill himself in smith's craft ; but he means to venture down here this sum-



mer if he can, for he longs to see you all once more, and the old forest where he was born. See here is a chain with links of steel which he wrought with his own hands; he sends it to his sister and these kerchiefs and ribands.'

As the packman said this, he produced the articles from his pack and handed them to the maiden, who received them with an exclamation of surprise and pleasure; while tears of joy came into the mother's eyes as she saw these tokens of affection from her son.

'Heaven bless the boy,' said Hubert, 'that he hath not forgotten his parents, and his poor home, I trust he risketh nought in coming to see us.'

‘He will come secretly,’ answered the dusty-foot, ‘and now that he has money in his pouch, he has a mind to try whether some cunning lawyer of the courts cannot win your freedom as hath been done by many others, who now have liberty to work for whomsoever they list.’

‘The boy meaneth well,’ rejoined Hubert, ‘but I fear the day of freedom is far off for me and mine. As the lord bids so must we work. And if we have eggs to sell or poultry, or a swine, we cannot sell whither we would, but must go to one market or one fair, and no other. Could we do as you master packman, and go where it pleased us, we should add somewhat to our slender gains. ’Tis a weary life.’

‘Ay! and will be worse yet,’ answered the dusty-foot, ‘for the king and his council have declared a new poll-tax; last year it was one groat, but this year it is to be three, and every body must pay.’

‘What, every body?’ exclaimed Hubert; ‘surely not bondmen and cottagers.’

‘Yes, bondmen and cottagers, fifteen years old or more, no matter how poor they be. Every body must pay, except beggars.’

‘More sorrow for the thralls,’ said Joan, ‘have we not enough to bear already?’

‘Let our masters pay it,’ cried Hubert, as he started up and paced to and fro in the narrow room. ‘Let our masters pay it. They call us their cattle, let them pay it. We belong not to ourselves.’

‘They do not go free,’ said the packman, ‘for a duke has to pay six pounds, and barons and knights two pounds, and gentlemen and burgesses, according to their means. Truly the council have soon forgotten what the good bishop of Rochester said when he preached before them at the king’s coronation, and advised them not to burthen the people with great taxations. There be many who say trouble will come of it.’

‘Let it come,’ rejoined Hubert, ‘shall we pay who are bondmen, and must serve our masters with life and limb? the nobles and the lawyers get all the money, let them pay the tax,’ and he continued pacing to and fro.

Cicely rose, and leading her father back to his seat, said in a soothing tone, ‘Do not chafe, father; it is better to be patient; and perhaps, the evil may be not so great as it seems.’

‘Patient, my child! who can be patient that must obey another’s will, work when that other pleases, and pay a sore tax out of an empty pocket?’

‘’Tis a grievous hardship, father: but what can we do? Besides, does not Jocelin tell us that better days will come?’

‘But when?’ retorted Hubert; ‘many a time have we heard of better days for the bondmen; but when are they to come?’

‘Soon enough,’ answered the dusty-foot, ‘if what I heard at Colchester fair yesterday, be true. There was talk among the folk of risings of the villans in parts of this county of Essex, and in Suffolk and Norfolk; and they do say, that over in Kent, on the other side of the Thames, there be thousands of them up in arms, who swear they will be bondmen no longer.’

‘Think ye it is true?’ inquired Hubert, eagerly.

‘Like enough,’ replied the packman, ‘for the villans in the fair looked overbold, and many said they would find money for the tax in the lords’ castles, and others declared that if villans were taxed, then villans ought to help make the laws.’

‘They said well,’ rejoined Hubert, ‘let them make free men of us, and then we’ll pay the tax, and show that a villan hath wit as well as a lord.’

‘There be many that say so already; had ye been at the fair, ye would have heard the minstrels singing as they went up and down:—

Come listen, good folk, come listen to me,
Come listen my merry men all ;
There's a time for the lord, and a time for the knight,
And a time shall come for the thrall.

For the thrall shall go up, and the knight shall go down,
And the flail be a match for the sword ;
And the thrall shall be free, and go where he will
And hold his head high as a lord.'

'And what said the thralls when they heard that ?' asked Hubert.

'They said not much,' answered the dusty-foot, 'but had ye seen them look at one another, and grasp their stout ash staves the tighter, ye would have known that the song was to their liking. It will not be long I warrant, before they sing it for themselves.'

'The tax will rouse many to anger who would have remained peaceable,' observed Hubert.

'Ay, it will so,' rejoined the packman ; 'as I was leaving the town I saw in one of the streets, women and young girls weeping, and their husbands and brothers looking sullen and angry, for the tax-gatherers had been there with brutal words, and seized their blankets and household stuff, because the humble folk could not pay the tax for lack of money. It made me sad to see the sight, and I gave six groats to a widow and her daughter, to save them from the like trouble.'

'Ye did kindly, good packman,' said Joan, 'may Heaven reward you for it.'

'Then I went a little farther,' continued the dusty-foot, 'and saw a throng of folk with a man speaking in their midst. I was minded to see what was doing, and on coming up found it was a gospeller—a Lollard as some call him—preaching to the crowd.'

'I have heard of them,' said Hubert, 'but whence do they come, and what do they preach about ?'

'They be disciples of one John Wycliffe, a zealous

churchman ; but who says that the church has many errors which must be amended. Great numbers have joined themselves to him, and some of these he sends forth to preach in all the country. They go barefoot and clad in a coarse gown, for Wycliffe says it is not seemly for a preacher to be rich, or to wear fine apparel.'

'If one would come to this poor dwelling,' interrupted Hubert, 'he would be right welcome.'

The packman went on ; 'What they preach about is taken from the Gospels, and they read the book to the folk, for Wycliffe has brought it from the Latin into our English speech, so that the common people may hear and understand. And in truth, they listen gladly, and when the gospeller said that all men were equal in the sight of God, that the master was no better than the servant, it made them cry out for joy. They never heard the like before.'

'Tis good news,' said Hubert, 'I would that every bondman in the land heard it !'

'They wout be bondmen long after that,' answered the packman, and added ; 'but good Hubert, it grows late, what is the hour ?'

'It must be near midnight,' was the answer.

'So late !' cried the packman : 'there's a wonderful clock lately set up in London : I wish we had little clocks to carry about with us, then we should always know the hour. But I must be up betimes in the morning—good night.' So saying, he climbed a ladder that led to a loft in the roof and disappeared.

After covering up the fire with ashes, the others laid down on their humble beds, and in a few minutes, all was quiet in the cottage ; the only sound that broke the silence was the rustling of the wind as it swept through the forest.

CHAPTER V.

THE INSURRECTION—THE MARCH TO LONDON—WHAT
HAPPENED ON THE WAY—THE BURNING OF THE
PALACE, AND ENTRY INTO THE CITY.

THE news of the rising spread fast and far through the land, and soon in Norfolk and Suffolk, Cambridgeshire, Essex, and parts of the adjoining counties, the villans all left the domains and estates on which they had worked as bondmen from the days of their birth, and betook themselves by tens and twenties, and hundreds, to the appointed meeting-places, where they assembled in such multitudes as to number tens of thousands. Most of them had never before been ten miles away from their little cottage-homes, and were ignorant of every thing except the simple tasks and duties which formed their daily occupation ; they knew how to labour, and would fight when their masters took them away in troops to the wars ; but none of the light of instruction which now overspreads the land had then shone upon them. It is not surprising therefore, if they showed the usual consequences of ignorance ; many were lazy, many vicious and cruel, many cunning and revengeful, and all of them superstitious. They believed in lucky and unlucky days, and in witches, and when any calamity overtook them, they thought it was caused by an unlucky day, or by some poor old woman who might have the reputation of being a witch. And yet these same bondmen could be brave in presence of real danger, and at times endure severe hardships without a murmur. They were a rude, sun-burnt, hard-handed multitude ; speaking a strong rustic dialect similar to that which

may be still heard in some parts of the south and east of England. Some among them, however, were men of honest purpose, and prudent judgment, and strove to act as advisers or leaders to the rest, and all of them were agreed in demanding their freedom. Liberty is precious, even to the humblest man ; it is to liberty that we owe so many of the blessings we enjoy in England.

Besides the counties which I have named, the rising had spread into Kent, Surrey and Sussex. Wat Tyler, he who had killed the tax-gatherer, was chosen leader, and the bondmen flocked to join him in such numbers, that he was soon at the head of a hundred thousand men, armed with many sorts of weapons. Some had only sticks and staves, others carried scythe-blades, sickles, hand-bills or axes, and a good number had bows and arrows, and spears, which they took by force from their owners wherever they could find them. Nothing could stop them ; and thus at the same time, on each side of the Thames, a great army of villans was advancing towards London.

On they went, day after day, their numbers continually increasing, along the roads, across the fields, choking the narrow streets of the towns and villages through which they passed, trampling down every thing that stood in their way. On they went, seizing food wherever they could find it, for the mighty hosts had to be fed every day, and many inhabitants of places in the line of march fled in terror at their approach. Whenever the multitude came in sight of a gentleman's house, a great party rushed to attack and plunder it. They dashed in doors, shattered the windows, broke open coffers and closets, to find parchments and writings which they burnt in the court-yard, with a great pile of the costly furniture. They had seen at times, when they had pleaded for liberty in a court of law, that the lords

and the lawyers, had always proved them to be bondmen by means of the parchments and writings, and the villans thought if these were destroyed they could never again be reduced to bondage. On they went, stopping all whom they met, making them shout for king Richard and the true Commons, and some who refused to shout were cruelly beaten or otherwise ill-treated. Any one who was known to be a hard, tyrannical master, they hanged without mercy, and all the lawyers they could seize shared the same fate, the villans declaring that lawyers and gentlemen were no longer wanted, and should everywhere be put to death. They would have none but peasants in the land, and in each county a peasant should be chosen as king, instead of having a monarch to rule over the whole realm, to keep them in subjection, and make them pay taxes against their will, and they carried a banner on which was written—

WHEN ADAM DELVED AND EVE SPAN,
WHO WAS THEN A GENTLEMAN ?

On they went, day after day, hastening towards London to see the king. Richard the Second, was then not more than seventeen years of age ; the villans knew that he was young, and believed that he would grant them their liberty, if the lords of his council would give their consent. They wished no harm to the king, but vowed vengeance on his advisers. But although bent on redressing their grievances the villans had frequent quarrels among themselves ; first, one wished to be king of a county, then another and another ; and some of the leaders were very haughty and overbearing, more so than the lords of whom they complained so much, and when roused to anger punished or killed their followers in the most brutal manner. Some of the

multitude were so shocked at these proceedings, that they gave up the march, and instead of going to London, turned their steps homewards, preferring to work in thralldom, rather than to submit to the violence of their companions and equals.

Ralph saw several of his companions withdraw one after another, but he kept on, and was among the most active in searching for food, and running hither and thither to rouse the villans on the farms and manors to take part in the struggle for freedom, and none were more ready than he to join in the shout for king Richard and the true Commons. Yet at times, when he had marched a whole day with little or no food, and had to lie down at night under a hedge, or among the fern and rushes that grew on the borders of the fields, he would feel half-inclined to wish himself at home, poor as that home was. He thought of his father, mother, and sister, sitting down to their frugal repast, and then sleeping quietly beneath their humble roof, while he, weary and footsore, was without shelter, a stranger in the midst of thousands, not one of whom could tell how the enterprise would end. But sleep comes to the weary although their bed may be on the ground, and Ralph would wake in the morning with renewed hope and courage. Every day, too, was bringing him nearer to London, and there he hoped to find his brother Roger, and learn some mechanic trade which he would like better than digging and ploughing.

At last the multitude came near to the city, and while the main body took up their quarters in the fields and meadows about Bow and Mile-end, which are now covered with streets and houses, a great troop went forward and posted themselves with their leaders, in sight of the eastern gates. Through these gates, which were defended by soldiers, was the only way of entrance on that side, for London was then surrounded by a strong wall, so that unless the

enemies who might come to attack it could gain possession of the gates, it was hardly possible to get into the city, for there were no cannon and gunpowder in those days for battering down fortified places.

Meanwhile Wat Tyler had marched across Kent with his thousands, and arrived at Blackheath, a high table-land on the hills above Greenwich, from which London can easily be seen. Here the vast multitude halted for a time, while messengers were sent to confer with the host on the other side of the river, and arrange plans for a further advance. Here the villans stood looking eagerly at the city which so many of them had never seen before, wondering at its numerous church-towers with their gilded weather-cocks glittering in the beams of the setting sun, the spire of old Saint Paul's rising high above all the rest. There, too, they saw the Tower, and the royal banner waving above the battlements, shewing that the king was within the fortress ; and there were ships which had come with merchandise from distant lands, some at anchor in the broad river Thames, others sailing smoothly on with the tide ; and at one place, what looked like a confused street supported on arches, shewed where stood the only bridge that then crossed the stream.

After waiting some time the host became impatient, and Tyler gave command to go forward. On they went, the archers and billmen marching first, and Tyler riding on a horse at their head. They soon reached Southwark, then only a village, and went up to the gate of the bridge which was strongly fortified and demanded entrance. But the citizens had armed themselves, and came there in haste, with such soldiers as they could muster, to defend the passage, for they knew that if the villans once got into the city there would be nothing but riot and mischief, and perhaps bloodshed. Finding

themselves stopped, Tyler and the other leaders determined to make an attack upon the palace of the Archbishop of Canterbury at Lambeth, which was on the same side of the river as Southwark. No sooner was the order given than the thousands of bondmen rushed in wild disorder over the low flat meadows which then lay on the south side of the Thames, shouting for success to the true Commons, and flourishing their weapons eager for the assault. Sudbury, the Archbishop, was one of the king's council, and was disliked by the people, who thought that Richard was too young to be a tyrant, and that the council alone were to blame for the tax and other oppressions under which they suffered. Presently they arrived at the palace, and bursting open the gates the mob poured in, rushing from room to room in search of the prelate, who, if he had been found, would have been cruelly murdered. The Archbishop, however, was in the Tower along with the king and other members of the council, and the villans, disappointed in their main object, began to tear down the beautiful tapestries and hangings, to dash the costly furniture to pieces, and above all to search for parchments and writings. All these things were piled in heaps in the middle of the spacious rooms, and burning torches thrust in among them, and in a very few minutes all parts of the palace were in a blaze. No one was allowed to plunder, for Tyler said they were not robbers, but men striving for freedom, and as the flames rose higher and higher, the mob set up a great shout, and cried, as they waved their torches—'Down with gentlemen: we will have neither gentlemen nor lawyers! There go the parchments, and the rolls, and the writings. Hurra! There shall be none but peasants in the land, and the peasants shall be free!'

It was a startling spectacle, for night had set in, and as the flames rushed and roared from every



window of the stately building, and the smoke rose in glowing and whirling columns above the blazing pile, a fearful light was spread through the air, visible for miles around. The king and the nobles saw it from the Tower, but they only laughed at what they called the ignorant rage of brutal villans ; and the citizens of London saw it, and the stout of heart took new courage at the sight, and the timid shrunk with alarm ; and many a mother felt her heart sink with terror as she looked from her window and saw the red gleam in the sky, and put up a prayer for her children who were sleeping peacefully in their beds unconscious of the danger that threatened their home. The common people saw it too, and they came from their dwellings in the back streets and

narrow lanes and alleys of the city, and met together in troops armed with such weapons as they could seize, and resolved to help the insurgents. While some of them crossed the river secretly in boats to hold counsel with the leaders of the bondmen, the others, ran to the bridge to open the gates. Tyler and his men, who after burning the palace had broken open two jails and set the prisoners at liberty, had by this time returned to Southwark and again demanded entrance, so that the lord mayor with his guards, and the people on the bridge, were now beset on both sides. The peasants being asked what they intended to do, replied that they only wished to punish those nobles who had brought distress upon the country by engaging in expensive wars and other extravagances ; on which the citizens open the gates, and Tyler with his thousands passed triumphantly over, and entered the city. They made no attempt to steal, and paid for all they wanted, and instantly cut off the head of any one of their number found plundering, and the Londoners hoped the bondmen would soon obtain their demands, and take their departure without further mischief. But so large a multitude was not easy to be kept in order ; they had not been long in the city before they found their way to the Duke of Lancaster's palace in the Savoy, not far from where Somerset House now stands, and renewed the work of destruction. The duke was one of the hated nobles, and the crowd rushed from room to room seeking for the owner, and wondering at the magnificence of the stately edifice, and tearing down the rich damasks, the gold and silver work, and tasteful carvings which beautified the walls. They spared nothing, and set the building on fire, and in a few hours nothing was left of its valuable contents but smoking ashes. One of the men who was detected stealing a silver candlestick was flung into the flames as a punishment for his offence, and to prove, as Tyler

had said, that the peasants were not robbers. Some thirty or forty of them, however, had got into the cellars of the palace where they broke open the wine casks, and stayed so long drinking the intoxicating liquor, that the walls of the building fell in and choked up all the passages, and the rioters unable to get out perished miserably under the fiery heap.

CHAPTER VI.

THE VILLANS IN THE CITY — RIOT AND PLUNDER —
CHARTERS GRANTED — MEETING WITH THE KING AT
SMITHFIELD — DEATH OF TYLER — FLIGHT OF THE
BONDMEN.

MEANTIME the host that had marched up from Essex, and halted at Mile-end, had made their way on the other side into the city, and came with eager haste to help on the mischief. The palace of the Bishop of Chester was next burnt; then Newgate and the Fleet prison were broken open, and the prisoners released. Among these were many hardened criminals who mingled with the crowd, and plundered whatever they could lay hands on; every moment the confusion grew more and more terrible, and the citizens began to repent that they had opened their gates. The mob finding no opposition, grew bolder at the sight of their own violence; and to avenge themselves on Sir Robert Hales, the Lord High Treasurer, they set fire to the spacious convent or Hospital of St. John, which continued burning for seven days; at the same time they burnt the Temple and the Inns of

Court, these being the places where the lawyers lived, and threw into the flames all the books and papers they could find anywhere in the lodgings of the law students. Again and again did they cry that they would have neither gentlemen nor lawyers, that villans' blows were as hard as lords blows, while Tyler declared that after a few days there should be no laws but such as he spoke with his own mouth.

So great were the numbers of the peasants, that they could be busy in many places at once ; a large party had already assembled on Tower Hill, wondering how they should get into the Tower which was separated from them by a wide and deep moat, and defended by high and strong walls, and six hundred archers. Richard was in the fortress with his council, they could hear the noise and shouting outside, and some among them trembled as the threatening cries of the despised peasants reached their ears. The bondmen had sent a message to the king asking permission to lay their grievances before him ; some of the council thought that the request should be granted ; but the Archbishop and the Lord High Treasurer besought the monarch to have nothing to do with such "shoeless ribalds." The bondmen heard of this, and it made them fiercer than ever to know that their message should be answered by scorn. The king, however, resolved to go out and confer with the insurgents, and he rode forth from the Tower on horseback attended by a few of his knights and nobles, and proceeded to Mile-end, whither he was followed by great numbers of the peasants. Here full liberty was given them to state their grievances ; the king thought it best to agree to all they asked, and he promised freedom to every one, and gave them a charter drawn up by one of his secretaries in which it was declared that thenceforth there should be no more servitude or villenage in England.

From the first the bondmen had believed that Richard would be their friend, as soon as he knew their wishes ; and when they saw him face to face, their confidence was strengthened. Richard's youthful and cheerful looks, his fair face and bright eyes won upon them, and now that he had come and talked with them and given them a charter to secure their freedom, it seemed there was nothing more to wish for. But while this peaceable interview was taking place at Mile End, a body of the villans who had remained in the city, had forced their way into the Tower, determined to have vengeance. They pulled the knights by the beard and mocked them with foul abuse, and rolled themselves on the king's bed, and rioted in his sumptuously furnished rooms, shouting that it was now their turn to reign and live with pomp and pride in a king's palace. All the lords and ladies who were in the Tower were treated with the grossest indignity ; and the archbishop and the lord high treasurer, who had called them "shoeless ribalds," were dragged from their place of refuge to the open place on Tower Hill, and there beheaded, amidst the shouts of the multitude. All sorts of injurious epithets were heaped upon them as they were hurried along, and all who could get near gave them rude cuffs and blows, asking in mockery whether a villan's knock could do any harm. No sooner had the heads of the two unfortunate noblemen fallen than they were set up on spears, and carried about in wild triumph, and at sight of the horrid spectacle, the bondmen sent up a furious shout, which struck dismay into the hearts of all who heard it. What was to be done ? whose turn would come next ? The king was obliged to betake himself to his palace at Westminster, while the villans joined by all the rabble of the metropolis, and made bolder by success, wantonly destroyed all that

excited their displeasure. They stopped all the Lombards and other foreign merchants and traders from France and Italy, whom they met in the thoroughfares, and bade them say the words—bread and cheese; and any one of the strangers who could not pronounce the words as well as an Englishman, was immediately put to death, the mob shouting all the time that as they would have no gentlemen and lawyers, so they would have no foreigners—England was for Englishmen. These murders were followed by the plunder of the merchants' warehouses; and all the rich velvets and silks, and embroideries, brought from over the sea, were trampled under foot in the streets or torn to pieces, and for a whole week this work of pillage went on, accompanied by drunkenness and murder, for any one that dared to interfere was knocked down without further question, and at last the rioters began to quarrel with each other, and numbers lost their lives.

In all this, we see the effects of ignorance; had the peasants been better informed, or had wiser leaders, the excesses might have been avoided. On the other hand, had they not been oppressed they would not have needed to fight for their liberty. We see in the event that wrong, whether on the part of those who rule, or those who are ruled, always brings its own punishment. Slavery, however, is so terrible a lot, that we cannot always blame those who make a struggle for freedom.

While this was going on, messengers had passed several times between the king and other parties of the peasants who, when they got the charters for which they clamoured, were still dissatisfied and made fresh demands, declaring they would not go home till they had liberty to buy and sell where they liked; they began too, to talk of further violence more terrible than any which they had yet at-

tempted ; and threatened that if their requests were not granted, they would murder the king and all the nobles, and set fire to the whole city.

Matters were in this state when another message came from the king, by which he promised that if the villans would meet him the next morning in Smithfield, he would hear what they had to say. Accordingly, early on the following day, Tyler having collected some forty or fifty thousand of the great multitude from different parts of the city, marched to the place appointed, and there he drew up his men in order of battle. The bowmen and those who were best armed, he stationed in front, and the rest in regular ranks behind one another, standing close and watchful in case of a surprise. When all were arranged, Tyler, seated on his horse, rode up and down between the lines exhorting them to stand firm, to show themselves true men, for the day had come when they should be free, and no more labour in forced bondage for knight or noble. The multitude answered with a shout that they would not disperse until all their demands had been granted.

Now the blast of trumpets was heard, and the cry rose that the king was coming. Tyler placed himself at the head of his men and waited for the monarch's approach. Presently Richard made his appearance riding on horseback with a few attendants ; he wore neither helmet nor armour, perhaps to let the peasants see that he believed they would do him no harm. A velvet cap was on his head, and a rich mantle trimmed with fur and glittering with pearls, hung from his shoulders, and the people thought as they saw his open cheerful look, that he had surely come to be their friend. Sir John Newton one of the knights, was sent forward to begin the conference, but Tyler in great anger, commanded him to dismount, declaring that no one but the king should ride in his presence. The king came up on hearing

the dispute, and bade the sturdy leader state his wishes. Tyler answered, that besides the charters already granted, which liberated the bondmen from their servitude, they should be left free to buy or sell anywhere they chose, and that all the forests, and warrens, and parks, and rivers, should be free also, so that poor men might hunt the game, and catch fish and fowl, as well as the gentlemen, and whenever they chose. As he said this, and while the king was considering his reply, Tyler rode nearer, and sat playing with his dagger in an insolent and threatening manner. The attendants fearing for Richard's safety came closer round him. Tyler grew impatient, and seized the bridle of the king's horse, on seeing which Sir William Walworth, the mayor of London, struck the daring leader so heavy a blow with his mace, that he fell from his horse, and as he lay stunned on the ground the other knights and esquires despatched him with their swords. This was a fearful moment, for no sooner did the bondmen see their leader fall, than they put themselves in motion to avenge his death. Savage cries and execrations were heard from the foremost ranks of the mighty host, and already the archers had drawn their bows and pointed their arrows; a minute more, and not one of the royal party would have been left alive on the field, when Richard with great presence of mind rode up to the throng, and cried with hearty voice;—'Why this clamour my liege men? What are ye doing? Will you kill your king? Be not displeased for the death of a traitor and a scoundrel. I will be your captain and your leader; follow me to the fields, and I will grant all you can ask.' A few were won over by the king's gracious manner they went behind him as he rode off, and all the others followed. When they were at some distance, the citizens began to recover from their panic, and armed themselves, and took measures to prevent a

renewal of the outrages which for a week had kept the city in alarm. The guards were replaced and strengthened at the gates, and in a short time the Tower was retaken ; and more than a thousand men well armed, and with a brave captain at their head, marched out to the fields on the north of the city, where the insurgents who had followed the king were assembled. The sight of the troops approaching at quick pace in military array, caused a sudden change ; the bondmen who a short time before had been so turbulent and resolute, seemed at once to lose all courage, and betook themselves hastily to flight. The king gave orders to spare the fugitives, saying, that many of them were simple-minded men, who had been made to forget their duty by a few who were discontented ; little mercy however was shown to the flying peasantry. As they ran in scattered groups over the country, they fell an easy sacrifice to the men-at-arms, who followed them on horseback, trampling them down, and dispatching them with swords and lances till hundreds of them were left dead in the fields. The nobles too, collected an army of forty thousand men, and so harassed and intimidated the poor villans as entirely to put down for that time any further attempts at insurrection. However, the charters had been given, and the hope of liberty cheered them as they straggled back to their humble homes ; but as soon as the danger was past, the king and the lords, false to their promises, revoked all the charters, and the peasants found themselves condemned once more to that weary bondage, with all its bitter pains and penalties from which they had so vainly striven to set themselves free.

Those who were powerful forgot to be merciful ; and despairing servitude was once more the lot of the English bondmen.

CHAPTER VII.

THE PEASANT'S HOME AGAIN—CONSEQUENCES OF THE
INSURRECTION—AN UNEXPECTED RETURN—FREEDOM
AT LAST, AND CONCLUSION.

WE must now leave this scene of tumult and suffering, and go back once more to the quiet forest in Essex.

Hubert had kept on with his work as usual ; he had heard of Ralph's departure from some of those who gave up and returned before reaching London, and comforted himself with the hope that his son would soon return with news that the villans were to be released from their bondage, and with liberty to work, and buy and sell wheresoever they pleased. But two weeks had scarcely passed before he began to see numbers of wretched-looking peasants hastening down into the country, eager, as it seemed, to leave London far behind them. Now and then some of the fugitives would enter the cottage to ask for a bit of bread, or a drink of water, and from them Hubert heard of the disastrous effects of the struggle for liberty ; how that Tyler had lost his life while conferring with the king at Smithfield, and the other leaders had been taken and executed, while the thousands of villans were all dispersed and put to flight. Still they remembered that the king had given them charters of freedom, and they hoped to find themselves free when the alarm and rage excited by the insurrection had subsided. But now they were all in terror : how soon had their bright expectations faded into disappointment !

This was sad intelligence, and what was worse, there came no tidings of Ralph ; no one knew what had become of him. Had he been killed in the street-

riots, or during the pursuit, was he lying anywhere wounded, or was he only hiding until he could find a safe opportunity for returning home? These were questions which the inmates of the cottage were continually thinking of or asking one another; and a deep sorrow filled their hearts because of the absent one, and Joan and Cicely often wept as they thought of him.

Hubert did not shed tears, yet he grieved sorely: then shortly afterwards came the news that the charters had been revoked, and the day of liberation from the galling yoke seemed farther off than ever. This was soon followed by a more alarming report: Chief Justice Tresillian had been sent out from London to different parts of the country, to try the rebels, as they were called, and he condemned to be hanged all that were accused and brought before him, whether guilty or not, till more than fifteen hundred of the hapless peasants had suffered the terrible penalty. In those days, judges too often forgot to temper judgment with mercy.

At length, nearly all the vassals had returned to the estate, none of them, however, could give any account of Ralph. The daily tasks were renewed and went on as before; there was hewing of wood and drawing of water, tending cattle and swine, besides field-labour and other services, and to those who had most set their hearts on gaining their liberty it seemed more irksome and grievous than ever to be still working as thralls.

Matters were in this state, with no prospect of a change, when one day, word went round among the bondmen that the new lord was coming to live at the castle. They talked about the change one with another, and wondered whether he would be as severe and haughty as their former master had been; would he increase their burdens, or show them kindness? No one could tell. Some among them

felt that it would be very, very hard to have to promise once more to be true and faithful servants to a master, who cared no more for them than for the swine that ate acorns in the forest; but it was always the case, that when an estate was sold, all the bondmen were sold with it, as though they had been cattle to be transferred from hand to hand, just as their owners pleased. Every one in turn would have to go before the new baron, and say,—“Hear you, Lord de Hedingham, I (Hubert Spink) shall be true and faithful unto you from this day forth, and shall owe you fealty for the land I hold of you in villenage, and be subject to you in body and goods, so help me Heaven and all the saints.”

Gloomy thoughts filled Hubert's mind as he walked slowly homewards at the close of the same day, and he was surprised as he drew near his cottage, to hear the sound of laughter and cheerful voices coming from within. What did it mean? and how was it that cheerfulness which had for so long forsaken his little dwelling, had suddenly come back again? It was speedily explained, for as soon as she saw him approaching the door, Cicely ran out to meet him, crying—‘Oh, father, father! Ralph's come home again, and Roger along with him.’

This was glad news for the weary bondman, and when he entered and his two sons rushed to grasp his hands, an exclamation of thankful joy burst from his lips.

‘Roger!’ he said, ‘welcome home again. How stout thou art grown, boy; and how bright thy eye is! It was never so in the days of thy servitude.’

‘I am free now, father,’ answered Roger, shaking Hubert's hand heartily, ‘and no man has a right to hold or harm me. And when a man can look whomsoever he will in the face without fear, shall his eye not be bright and his countenance brave?’

‘I would I were free too, my son,’ replied Hubert,

'thy words make me feel the more how hard it is to be a bondman.'

'Grieve not, father,' said Cicely, 'let us be cheerful now that my brothers are come home;' and she kissed her father and patted him on the cheek as though coaxing him to forget the one great sorrow that weighed him down. She then set herself, with a willing spirit and ready hand, to prepare their homely supper.

How happy was Joan! she seemed never to grow tired of gazing at Roger, and admiring his altered looks, and to know that Ralph had returned unharmed from all the dangers of the insurrection, was to her satisfaction enough, though Hubert said it would have been better had Ralph hidden himself in London for a year and a day, and then he too would have been free. Then Roger told that he had come home with Ralph, because he hoped to be able to buy his father's freedom with the money which he had saved. Every one looked pleased on hearing this except Hubert, who shook his head and said, that as he had lived a thrall, so did he believe he should die a thrall. Cicely, however, begged him not to despair, and afterwards Ralph related all that had befallen him, from the time of his departure. He had seen the king at Mile End, when the meeting with the vassals took place, and heard him promise the charters of freedom, and had helped to shout 'Long live King Richard,' believing, with the others, that the day of liberty was indeed at hand. Afterwards he went through the city with the throng of peasants, wondering at the extraordinary sights that met his eye, but when the plunder and rioting began, his heart failed him, and he stole away and wandered up and down all the narrow streets wherever there was any noise of work going on, in the hope of finding his brother. He had nearly given up the search in despair, when he heard the sound of a

hammer upon an anvil, and looking in at the smithy from whence it proceeded, there he saw Roger, hard at work, making the sparks fly from the red-hot iron with vigorous strokes of his sturdy arm. The meeting was a joyful one, and Roger had kept him concealed until all danger was past, and now they had both come home together.

Many were the exclamations of surprise and thankfulness that interrupted Ralph's story ; and Cicely seemed as though she could never grow tired of asking questions about the great city of London, with its palaces, and churches, and long streets of shops, and hundreds of people walking about, many of them wearing fine dresses, such as were never seen in country places : and so in cheerful talk, all troubles were for a time forgotten.

The next day was an important one for all who dwelt on the estate of the Lord de Hedingham. At an early hour the cottars, borderers, and villans might be seen making their way across the fields, and through the forest to the castle. In the court-yard of the ancient building the retainers or fighting-men were drawn up in regular array, the serving-men were all dressed in new liveries, and ran nimbly about in performance of their duties, or waited in the places allotted to them. Gradually the throng of tenants poured into the great hall, until the whole space was filled, and a few of the villans had to remain on the outside by the door, where they stood watching what went on within.

At the upper end of the hall, on the raised floor, called the dais, was seated the Lord de Hedingham, and by his side the Lady Edith, richly apparelled. High over their heads hung a splendid banner of crimson and gold, a pile of parchments lay on a table at one side under the charge of the steward, and on the other side stood Father Eustace, with Jocelin in the rear, holding a book in his hand to be used in

the coming ceremony. It was a striking spectacle ; the lofty and the lowly met face to face, and the vassals waited in silent expectation of what was to follow. Many among them sorrowing that they should have to renounce their right to liberty once more, and promise faithful service with their lips, which they refused in their hearts. It was a solemn moment.

While they thus stood waiting, the Lord de Hedingham rose and said, as he looked round on the assembly :—‘ Ye are here to renew your oaths of fealty to me, your lord and master, for the estate with all that lives and grows upon it, is mine. Ye owe me service by the law of the land, and I look for faithful service ; and I know full well that many who now stand before me marched up to London with the rebels, and took part in their riotous doings.’

When the villans heard this, they looked at one another in dismay, and began to tremble for the consequences of their revolt. The lord, however, went on :—‘ Ye have been misguided and led astray by evil counsellors, some have lost their lives, and in other ways many have been severely punished ; in consideration whereof I shall not chastise you further. And now, moved by the entreaties of the lady Edith, who is, as most of ye are, of the Saxon race, I release ye all from your bondage. Henceforward there shall be none but freemen on my estate. Ye shall pay me rent for your cottages and your lands ; and to such as work for me, I will pay a due fee for their labour. The steward will inscribe your names on the roll as my tenants, and by that shall ye know that your thralldom is at an end.’

For a moment, every one stood in dumb amazement, scarcely believing what they had heard ; but when they saw the proud and grateful look which the lady Edith cast upon her husband, as he stood there



with the glow of benevolence upon his face, such a shout went up as had never been heard in the castle hall since it was built, making the old oaken roof ring again with the sound. Hands and arms were lifted aloft in wild excitement ; many of the women wept from the surprise of the sudden joy, and tears were seen dropping from the eyes of some of the bearded weather-beaten peasants who looked too rugged and toilworn for any such display of feeling. Again and again was the hearty cry repeated, 'Long live the Lord de Hedingham, and the lady Edith.' So great is the power of kindness to touch the heart and win the affections !

As Hubert walked home, he held his head erect ;

his eye had never been so bright nor his step so firm. The desire of his heart was accomplished, and he was free. How sweet it seemed to breathe the breath of liberty !

His family were by his side, their hearts too full for speech, and they walked for a time in silence. As they came in sight of their cottage, they saw a man barefooted, and dressed in a coarse gray gown, slowly advancing. 'He looks like one of the gossellers that the dusty-foot told us of,' said Cicely.

'He is a gosseller,' remarked Ralph, 'Roger and I saw one as we journeyed home from London.'

The stranger accosted them and craved food and shelter till the next day, for he had walked far and was foot-sore. Hubert gave him a hearty welcome, and they all entered the cottage. After rest and refreshment, the wanderer told that he went about from place to place, teaching the poor something that was good for them to know ; and taking a short thick book in parchment cover from the pocket of his gown, he read aloud to the listeners who sat in eager attention, catching every word that fell from the speaker's mouth. It was such as they had never heard before.—"Blessed are the poor in spirit : for theirs is the kingdom of heaven—Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted—Many that are first shall be last ; and the last first—Come unto me all ye that labour, and are heavy laden, and I will give ye rest."

When he had finished, Hubert said—'I could almost be a bondman again to hear such words as those, but if ye teach the same to all the thralls in England, master gosseller, there will soon be no more bondage.'

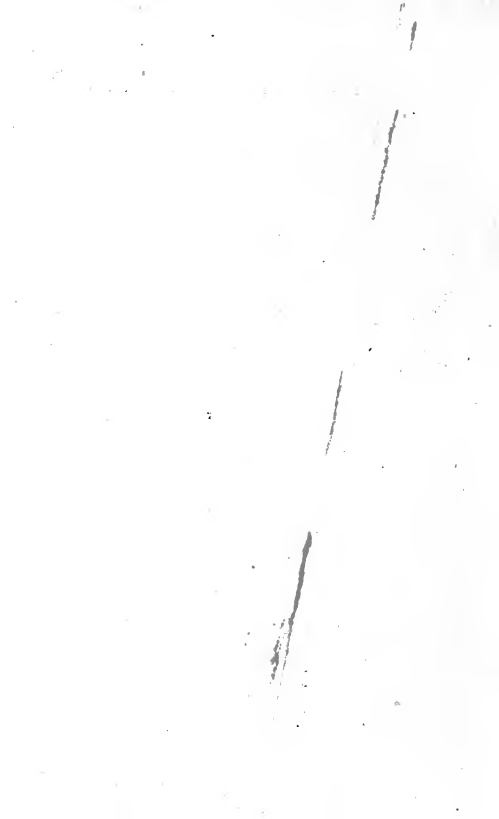
'There is a spirit abroad,' answered the stranger, 'which will grow and prosper until all men shall be free as ye are this day. Meantime we go up and down, preaching the truth to all who will hear.'

And so in glad discourse the evening wore away ; and many a prayer was put up that night for the Lord de Hedingham and the Lady Edith.

Such was one of the struggles for liberty of the peasant population of England ; but although they were released from bondage in several parts of the country, the greater number still remained in a state of villenage. From time to time, they made new efforts to gain their freedom, and another great insurrection, of which Jack Cade was the leader, broke out in 1450. London was again captured, but the insurgents were driven back, as on the former occasion, and only by slow degrees was the long-desired liberty obtained. Sometimes the question was talked about in parliament, at others, the great proprietors at their death would order all their bondmen to be set free ; and at last, in the reign of Charles II., a law was passed which put an end to slavery in England for ever. From that time our peasantry have gone on with their useful labours, ploughing, sowing, and gathering the harvests, living hard and on small wages, but sharing the rights and privileges of free men in common with the rest of the nation.

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